

SANTOKBA—A STORY-TELLER WITH A DIFFERENCE



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In a small village of Gujarat, along the west coast of India, a little girl listened wide-eyed to the village story-teller narrating the *Puranas*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. While the rest of the villagers returned home to the warmth of their beds to rest their weary limbs, Santokba lay wide awake, rewinding the evening's show in her mind's eye. She was excited by the narrator's actions, songs and expressions. She soon found that the stories were etched in her mind and she also could narrate them all without a flaw.

Her brain was like a recording machine. Whatever she heard she remembered without missing on anything, and also faithfully retold the stories in her own impeccable style.

She loved stories. The vivid characters, their conflicts, their love, loyalty and uniqueness, the

interwoven scenarios all thrilled and haunted her and soon became a part of her life. A gifted person, she picked up numerous ballads and kept singing them with gay abandon. One day she would tell stories too!

An extremely talented mother who mingled the bright rich earthy colours of the land in her beautiful embroidery attracted young Santokba to the art of weaving colours on cloth.

They had all found a home—the stories, the songs and the colours. They intermingled and remained dormant in a heart that was vibrating with the excitement and desire to create, nursing a cherished ambition. They lay dormant for 50 long years until Santokba was 65 years old!

In the meantime life went on. An early marriage and four children, and then widowhood.

Yet the spirit remained undaunted. She sent her three boys to a charitable institution and then slogged. Like never before. No work was too small or beneath her. She needed the money for her children. Work was the only thing that mattered. Not a minute was spent in idleness. She stitched, embroidered, she took orders for painting designs on cloth for weddings and festive occasions, and amidst all this she kept on singing. Life was certainly not a lark.

Initially, she painted her figures and designs only for the local people. The medium she used was strange to a city bred. She used raw cotton rolled into a wick, dipped in gum and cow dung. The brush and paints came long after that, when her elderson became an artist in his own right and put up his first exhibition. Apparently, he had inherited the art from his mother.

As mentioned earlier, Santokba was now 65

years old. The seed had germinated and was ready to burst open into a seedling, a plant, a tree with branches, flowers, leaves and fruits—all in one go! The tree was already a full grown one. Fifty years was a long time to wait and after that there was no looking back. The story-teller was born. She had only to pick up the tools — the brush, the paints and the canvas!

After that it was like a symphony. The mind dictated the stories, the hand picked up the incidents and drew the figures in colour. And then the canvas spoke. There was total synthesis.

Then they all disappeared. People loved them, they grabbed them. Where were her stories? Her gods and goddesses, princes and paupers, mermaids and beautiful damsels—? As soon and as many as she made, hands came to take them away. "I will paint a story in such a manner that no one person can take it away," she said to





herself. She thought and thought, and then she began to sing!

As she sang the *Mahabharata*, her hands started painting. First 'creation', the ten avatars of Vishnu, Maharishi Vyas telling the story while Ganesha writes it on palm leaf using his broken tusk as a pen!

She smiled and looked at her own hand holding the brush dipped in paint. "I will tell the entire story of the *Mahabharata* on cloth so that young and old, children and adults will come again and again to see it, and no one person can take it away."

Today, 1200 metres of cloth and only three chapters of the great epic have been told. There

are fifteen more chapters to come! Her favourite character from the *Mahabharata* is Bhishma because of his total devotion and loyalty to his father. Special care has been taken to paint *Bhishma pratigya* or "Bhishma's vow" on a large, single panel.

The colossalness of the effort is breathtaking, its magnitude mind boggling. It is the sheer conquest of an artist who is very sure of herself.

The colours are vibrant, the human figures well proportioned and lively, the story meticulous. Looking at them one feels they have come alive. This is folk art and the colours used are also made of a combination of local materials, like Jaipur powder mixed with some gum and chemicals heated and churned well.

At 85 years now, Santokba can look back at her achievement with pride. She is still very active and paints, embroiders and sings. She does not wear spectacles. "My eyes are good, why should I wear them?" she asks.

Her motto in life: "I hate people wasting their time. One must keep oneself busy." She remembers many who have helped her in some way or the other though fame has not affected her even in the slightest manner.

Even at this age she takes a keen interest in all that happens around her. She is a great cricket fan. In her own village she encourages the young boys to form local teams and play the game. A 'Santokba Running Shield' for cricket is presented to the winning team. When she has free time she gathers the children around her and regales them with stories, some even of her own making. "I always make my stories funny so that they make the children laugh. I love to hear the laughter of children, don't you?" she asks. Who could disagree with that?